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Authorship and Plagiarism – Discursive issues and educational effects

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Abstract

New writing and reading practices, due to advances in technological convergence, demand changes on models of construction and circulation of cultural goods. That means new relations of authorship, which bring questions to the logic in the established copyright law, and simultaneously, highlight a trial of strengths between discourses, such as copyright and copyleft, regulation and transgression, author protection and public access to creative work (Fapesp 2010/52454-7). Therefore, this paper focuses on educational challenges, which are a result of these technical and social transformations.

We take as the object of our studies, activities developed during the long distance course *Reading/Writing Processes and Digital Technologies in Education*, on Moodle's a virtual learning environment, in which Brazilian public schools teachers were the course's target. Based on the theoretical and methodological principles of discourse analysis, we explored the meanings of authorship and plagiarism that circulated during the course's activities, as well as virtual interfaces as potential authorship environments.

As results we highlight two aspects: in order to avoid plagiarism, the importance of placing writing and reading in the perspective of an affiliation process; and, in order to maintain teacher's autonomy, the importance of comprehending the technical possibilities of a virtual learning environment, so that it can be used according to teaching principles and not as a given object, a neutral technology.

Keywords: authorship; plagiarism; discourse; education; technology.

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1. Introduction

We are experiencing changes in the production and dissemination of culture. The relationship between public/private, producer/consumer and editor/author has been transformed by the new possibilities of technological convergence. The roles of author and reader also suffered changes, thus becoming an overlapping set that is facilitated by the digital space.

This new model brings several polemic arguments, in a search for a discursive hegemony. Thus, the meanings of copyrights instituted by laws, agreements, national and international treaties are in constant change, also in a confrontation between regulation and transgression. This confrontation puts in evidence a power-game between discourses, such as those of *copyright* and *copyleft*, just like we discussed in Abreu (2012).

In this context, we bring the question of authorship and plagiarism in the educational scope.

It has become a commonplace to hear teachers complaining about students increase use of the feature of ‘copy and paste’, when surfing the Internet. There are teachers and schools who have decided to ask for hand written work, in an attempt to force students to read and write, believing that then the students will not copy. Could this be the solution? The problem, in the teacher’s point of view, seems to be the lack of appropriate reading. Or could it reside in the student’s lack of ethical conduct? Or might there be alternative reasons?

One should remember that this lack of reading and unethical behavior is a manifestation that keep arising, ever stronger, thanks to the Internet and its boundless possibilities of access to information, and therefore it is not caused by the Internet. We call these acts manifestations, as they are revealing a lack, a gap, a failure: it sounds to us identical to a claim for attention.

Therefore, we have as main objectives to understand the current meanings of authorship and plagiarism in the Internet scope, as well as analyzing a virtual learning environment as an area of potential authorship, understanding that the diverse interfaces, whereas technological tools that are apparently closed in its material organization, may present possibilities for openings and new creations. In other words, what is the materialistic weight in the discourse relations?

The vision of plagiarism, in school, as a directive of warning, purely punishment, and with the sole focus on the product, we desire to question. Starting with the assumption that the construction of plagiarism is a process that involves teachers, students, and the school as a whole, as well as methods that form cultural property, its access by society and without doubt the configuration of new media on the Internet. Therefore, plagiarism it is not simply an isolated and individual action. Since we understand that, the thought of plagiarism involves reflecting on authorship, which is evident in Schneider (1990), on treating the *Thieves of Words*. And authorship reminds us of interpretation, thus we put the problem of plagiarism in direct relationship with the practices of reading and writing, which are organized in different forms throughout our society. Speaking specifically on school settings, the relationship between approach/methods used and practices of reading/writing done by the students brings us a special meaning, since is where the specificity of our work in the development of language teachers resides.

2. Meanings of authorship and plagiarism

Authorship and Plagiarism were two key themes developed during the long distance course *Reading/Writing Processes and Digital Technologies in Education*, offered at UFSCar Teacher’s Portal, through Moodle platform – Brazilian public schools teachers were its target audience.

UFSCar Teacher’s Portal is an institutional program, originally funded by PROEXT/MEC 2003/2004/2005. The Teachers Portal (<http://www.portaldosprofessores.ufscar.br>) is a site that focuses

on meeting the formative needs of teachers in different levels and modalities of teaching, and also other fundamental education professionals. In a set of long distance sessions, the portal provides individualized and groups support, to teachers and schools. The teacher-users can, among other things: receive aid for evaluation and construction of instructional materials; ask questions; receive a several number of information (events, contests, public policy, etc.); exchange successful experiences; keep contact with professionals of the university of different areas of knowledge; and participate in virtual communities (REALI, MIZUKAMI, 2009, p.97).

In the sequence we present a few considerations brought by the participating teachers, in which questions about reading, writing, authorship and teacher action arise:

Participating Teacher N:

“I personally do not believe that plagiarism is a display of self-denial on the part of the plagiarist. In fact I believe it is a necessity for self-assertion, thereof a inherit condition of being a student. The student who places himself in a situation of plagiarism does so because he needs to prove himself to the teacher. With intent or even by way of ingenuity, the student tries to take advantage of a resource that does not bring efficiency, but a mistake. In an assessment the student aims at the final grade and not the learning process that the work offers. This assumption conditions the student to seek resources to obtain the desired result (a high grade). Thus, the resource of the assessment becomes a commonplace to the student, because he seeks merely the resulting grade, and not the means by which one creates the need for evaluation. This behavior should and must, in fact, be rejected and condemned by the teachers. The students should be reprimanded, alongside the law, for their undue practice and advised about it. Likewise, the teachers must explain the contradictory focus between teacher and student assessment values. Namely, the teachers should warn students, prior to delivering assessments, about the function of evaluating the knowledge that the student has acquired throughout the course. In summary, it is the sole or main purpose of the evaluation, not a final grade. So that students can change the focus of their production, to focus on understanding the recording of their acquired knowledge, not just the final grade. To facilitate this need of self-assertion, inherent to the student because of his status, be directed to his own knowledge and not just assignments grades. The teachers must be tough when dealing with plagiarism, so that students do not use the dreaded "little Brazilian way”.

Participating Teacher P:

“When thinking of the role of teachers, it is reasonable to treat the subject plagiarist and the explicit theme of plagiarism in the classroom. Often we assume it is paraphrasing, and is actually plagiarizing the original author. Thus, it seems necessary that teachers make clear the limits of paraphrasing, and what plagiarism is, as well as the judicial sanctions. Teachers must emphasize the control over what is produced (gain knowledge), since a number of other students copy, because they know that the teacher does not give feedback, which means that many teachers ask for work but do not read it. Consequently the students perceives little or no difference between writing for themselves and copying – by copying they turn out to avoid time spent in their own writing.”

Participating Teacher E:

“We saw that nowadays the teacher's role is in configuring an individual, not just ‘deliver’ knowledge and bring content to the classroom. The teacher of the information era is responsible for the ethical and moral learning of these subjects, and for making explicit that a copied assignment is bylaw a crime. However, this requirement of ethical commitment should not happen only in the academic life: from earlier grades students must be aware that there is free access to information, but the misappropriation of

this information is illegal. The students should be required to have gained these grounds before being placed in front of such critical tasks. Therefore student should be made to build their own opinion and work, instead of putting up with copying the work of others.”

Participating Teacher M:

“The digital age certainly gives the reader/writer facility to access information. All this ease brings up a delicate issue: plagiarism, a very common practice, especially among young students. They often fail to produce their own texts and begin to take ownership of unrelated content, without worrying about the authenticity of their productions. This process should be changed with the construction of the subject as an author, and for this to happen reading in school needs to move from the shallow to authentic, as exposed in Chartier (1994, p.155). ‘Reading in school is artificial, practiced by the means of texts just made to compel reading, while social reading is authentic, practiced in situations where the reader knows why he needs to read’. By building his texts, the author places in-between lines, his worldviews, his positioning, and his profile as an author.”

The participating teachers, because already are working in their field, bring some important issues regarding reading, writing and potential situations of plagiarism. One can understand, from their comments, that there is a relationship between the teacher’s methods, the pitch presented to students and how the teacher establishes a dialogue, originated from their texts. We believe that inside the motion of this relationship is where student’s authorship starts to develop.

The authorship, in a discursive perspective, is composed by an act of interpretation, a result of a course and a construction of files. Therefore, in the words of Orlandi (2005, p.71):

The [teacher] question is not what text to give, but to be aware of the meanings produced in a variety of texts, for which the pupil perceives the process, rather than only accumulating products. It's not a question of quantity, but the relationship of meanings in the formation (qualitative) of files. (...) What matters is to make the pupil realize that there are relations in the meanings that circulate. There are meanings that are entangled, forming affiliations. To understand, he needs to see these relationships, as we introduce common goals. Hence we seek to change the image that he has about reading, bringing new elements to his reflection, other ways of reading. It is therefore about creating conditions for him to work in order to build files – documental discourses of all kinds – that open his understanding for different possible meanings, even unfulfilled ones.

From a set of affiliations, from a constructed path, the reader/student feels safer to write, to position himself, by taking author’s thoughts as arguments, which then can sustain his written text.

With this working method, allowing a construction of networks of meanings, we can prevent the silencing of authorship. According to Paasonen (2007), erasing traces of the past, in a temporal compression, creates a form of amnesia, for which citation practices serve as constraint and means of linking debates and paradigms. According to Orlandi (1997, p.148), while handling the silencing of authorship, this erasing causes effects, because the pupil “rather than unfolding meanings (polysemic process which is the base for the discursive functioning), doubles the meaning (in the sense of ‘double’ and ‘shrink’), shortening the path of meaning.”

The process of working with students through different methods of quoting is also essential to avoid that the student, by ignorance, commits plagiarism. The citations, according Orlandi (1997), mark the historicity of language and indicate that the construction of knowledge is a collective act. The erasure of the mention of other means a process of denial, as Orlandi (1997) writes: it denies the trajectory of the senses, denies the identity of others, and denies the identity of the person writing as author.

3. Terms of authorship and technological possibilities

Our reflection concentrates on virtual learning environments, focusing on the interfaces, considered as potential spaces of authorship. Not only the way these interfaces are configured, but also how much can be appropriated by individuals that are embedded in a learning process, are issues that arise at a time that more and more educational institutions tend to offer long distance courses. For that reason, we propose rethinking the construction of meaning and its dissemination. Given the electronic treatment of the information, which is considered by Auroux (1992) to be one of the techno-linguistic instruments, along with grammar and the dictionary, these instruments are understood as social practices “that have left intact the human linguistic practices” (p.70).

We start from a notion of education in which the individual – situated in history – is at the center of the process, also placing language as the fundamental aspect to be considered, since it is in/through language that the individual constitutes itself (ORLANDI, 2000, p.37). That means to understand how meaning circulates by/through several technological instruments. And with that we end up claiming that material forms are not neutral, but loaded with meaning. We can draw an analogy with the radio and television, following Picanço (2003, p.37) considerations when discussing the risks of reductionism in the educational process, through virtual environments:

the technology (technical / knowledge), which led to radio and television, enabled both the emission and reception of information. However, since the appropriation of these production processes of technology, different settings are being displayed and maintained at the expense of efforts and intentions. It is simplistic to say that the technical devices, in this case the communication and information technologies, are merely tools, like if they have kept only a usability value, and as they embodied false neutrality.

Challenges that distance learning process has are the activities suggested to the student, through platform and other didactic materials, and the work conditions established by the responsible for the course:

According to this model the creation of teaching materials is centralized and its distribution is made in a large scale, through a high work division among the teams of specialized teachers and technicians, not to mention the tutors that make possible to operate the reception. (...) Many experiences of LDE (long distance education) use the media as tools to trigger the distribution of content, which is produced centrally, by experts. This option is marked by a hierarchical model, initiated by a mass education model. This production process has a large division of work, where teams of specialized teachers make the content, technicians produce institutional communication, and tutors facilitate the reception of content to students (PICANÇO, 2003, p.7).

Picanço, while making explicit the risk of a process that has its supply of content vertically transmitted, does not necessarily stop the possibility of subverting the model, then again this is greatly challenging.

With regards to a virtual learning environment, the planning, which implies on reflecting and deciding on which interfaces to work with, is fundamental, in order to provide spaces for case studies, interpretation of charts, portfolios, log book, forums, chats, etc. What matters is the multiplicity of languages that, somehow, will serve the diversity of pupils. In particular, this process has to have an

understanding of the concepts underlying the model on the platform, with the perspective of available interfaces and potentially possible work modes.

We understand that there is a game, not always easy, among technical possibilities and methods of using them, generating an appropriation process.

As stated by Chartier (2000,p.67), about the concept of ownership:

allowing etymological links on both dimensions that are present in the concept of ownership: to appropriate is to claim property on something; and, this way, the concept of ownership was used by Michel Foucault to describe all devices that try to control the dissemination and circulation of discourses, establishing over the discourse and through its material forms an ownership. There is a sense of ownership in hermeneutics, which consists of what individuals do with what they receive, and that is a form of invention, creation and production, from the moment they take possession of the texts or objects received. Thus, the concept of ownership can mix the control and the invention, and can articulate the imposition of a sense and the production of new meanings.

It is in the space between control and invention that the teacher operates, building contents on virtual environments. Among the limitations imposed by the own environment, there are possibilities of resistance, reinterpretation, re-meaning, suggesting new techniques of working with interfaces, designing new ways, building new relationships between the team considered as technical, the teachers and the student. But not everything is transparent and regards decisions, as we deal with language and so:

The meaning, writes G. Canguilhem, escapes from any reduction that tries to host it on an organic or mechanical configuration. The so called intelligent machines are the ones that produce relationships among the data supplied to them, but they are not in relation to what the user intends from these relationships. As the meaning is the relationship to, people can play with the meaning, deviate it, simulate it, lie, make a trap” (CANGUILHEM, 1990, pp.16-17, cited by PECHÊUX, 1994,p.62).

It is on these slippery spaces, of games with meanings – whether we like it or not – that we think about the process of attendance and virtual learning. Spaces that have form and content, not totally random, not completely determined, more or less open and administered spaces, which depend on the conditions given for the production of meaning that, according to Orlandi (2000:40), “what is material (the language is subject to misunderstanding and historicity), what is institutional (social formation, in its order) and imaginary mechanism.”

The perception of a strong relation between technical and political instruments is taken from Auroux (1998, p.321), for whom the existence of these instruments “is placed not out of society and its place, but within its own scheme, in the construction of a single thread that is techno-social indissoluble. This perception is also viewed by Pêcheux (1990), for whom the instrument in itself cannot be considered independent of a theory or as a simple application of it.”

Technology, therefore, is understood as a social practice, since instruments are created not in a vacuum, but full of interests and expectations:

that move into a process acquiring dynamic, intensity, modifications, blocked relations, processes and structures, which can be social, economic and cultural ones. Structures which are active on national and worldwide social spheres. Taking this route will lead them to acquire the presence, power and scope of social techniques such as organization, work, control, management of social systems and the game of social power (IANNI, 1998,p.18).

As these instrument

s are bringing techno-political questions, they are also theoretical ones, as they inherently relate to economical, social, and cultural aspects. The instruments are not put in place isolated from an ideology. Orlandi situates it as “ideology is not concealment, but the interpretation of meaning in a certain direction, where this direction is determined by history.” (1997:101).

From this position, we bring an analysis of some observed data regarding *forum* and *task* configuration, during the course Reading/Writing and Digital Technologies in Education.

The following considerations are focused on two interfaces of Moodle platform – Task and Forum – used during the course offered by the Teacher’s Portal.

The Moodle’s task interface, in the way made available for the course, offered the following possibilities of use:

Group Type: offers the following configuration options:

- No groups – there is no division of the students that are participating in the discipline in groups.
- Separate groups – each student of every group only sees the colleague and documents of his own group, as well as the information regarding these participants. The messages and students from other groups are not visible.
- Visible groups – each student can only participate in the activities of his group, but can see the activities and colleagues of other groups.

New Send: the default configuration prevents the student from sending again the same task after it has been evaluated. If that option is triggered, students can continue to send different versions of the task, even after it has been evaluated. This can be useful, if the teacher wants to encourage students to improve their results, or when there is an interactive evaluation process, and successive revisions.

Comment inserted on the sentence: If this option is selected, the original submission will be copied into the comment field during evaluation, making it easier to comment on the text (perhaps using a different color) or to edit the original text.

The choices on how to formulate the tasks, for example, depend on a previous format, which may be under the control of the teacher or not. From these, there are effects related to the possibilities of collective reading and writing, rewriting of texts, more comprehensive view of the course by the participants, among other aspects.

Such decisions may be placed within a teaching methodology, with the intention of being merely efficient, worrying about adjusting itself to the interface possibilities, established by the technical team, following a trim already established, without considering the effects that this model of circulation of the proposed contents can establish, due to its materiality.

The materiality here is argued using the meaning worked by Orlandi (2006). The author works the relationship between language, speech and ideology, from the idea that “the specific materiality of the ideology is the discourse and the specific materiality of the speech is the language”. For the author, the materiality is established as speech materiality:

the material form, that is the text, moves with the information’s nature, produces effects on the way it works. The nature of the significant (different languages) affects the production of the object, and this object in turn, is the manner of signification of this symbolic gesture. And what is a text? It is a unit of signification in relation to the situation. This characterization can be maintained, but certainly the textually, its material form, its relationship with the memory and production settings differ when its significant materiality differs. (...) The space has meaning, has materiality and is not indifferent in its different ways of meaning (ORLANDI, 2006, p.5).

We have to take into consideration the biased behavior of these instruments, and the constitutive relationship between form and content, understanding that the computerized data is like effects of discursive positioning, as stated by Pêcheux (1994).

We understand that the treatment of the text does not exist only in the digital field, even though we cannot erase the discursive power of this field acting in a conflicting game with the positions that are sustained by plurivocality of the meaning, in the materiality that fails.

The appropriation of knowledge does not happen without clashes. This becomes evident when we make decisions about the subjects that will make up a curriculum, and the content of their digests. It is an ideological fight that is established and translated to “the struggle over the ‘way a question is presented’, the ‘order of the questions’, etc., depending on the ideological-discursive effects that this or that presentations assumes and reacts” (PÊCHEUX, 1988, p.223).

Therefore the formulation is understood as political, by way of ‘all speech is a political act, because all significance has a direction, divides’ (ORLANDI, 2004, p.129). By thinking this question of the division of the meaning, we bring a few considerations from the interface discussion forum.

The forum is an interface, whose asynchronous characteristic brings a potential for higher density in postings, by the student and tutor/teacher. But that depends on how the instrument is appropriated by the individuals involved. Thus, the existence of the forum does not necessarily mean authorship, since authorship implies in positioning oneself in front/next to other people’s words, projecting new meaning and taking responsibility for them.

4. Conclusion

The participation in a forum, as a potential space for authorship, reveals important aspects of the individual’s relation to language. At the forum, the individual experiences a search to stabilize meanings, his meanings. Then, in the opacity of language an illusion appears, because it is to have knowledge from language that is ruled by partiality. This partiality is forgotten in order to circulate meaning. We think “I finished, managed to write everything,” in a necessary gesture for closing the text posted on a forum, but illusory, since it is “just an illusion that one thinks one can give the ‘final word’. Neither the speech has a verifiable beginning: the meaning is (always) in progress” (ORLANDI, 2004, p.11).

Let us not forget that distinctive materiality brings different relationships of the individual with his text production. Thus, in an interface like a forum of a virtual learning environment, we normally have small text files that often seem lost, disconnected from other participant’s posts, made at different times. Nevertheless these texts are intersected, sometimes mediated by a professor-tutor who takes over students wording, highlighting the link between the posts.

This move from the professor-tutor, in order to “bring order out of chaos” – as some professor-tutors say – implies in a closing action, which seems to contradict a principle that we hold important: the speech is open. However, we can understand it as a metaphor for the process of signification, which, even though it is open, in movement, is managed (ORLANDI, 2004, p.11), and there is always, by the individual part, an attempt of controlling.

Regarding the gesture of the professor-tutor, with his intervention, he establishes a particular reading; there is an effect of leaving obscure the fact of the participating student makes the possible links in the forum, i.e. he links his wordings to others that make sense to him, from his discursive memory.

The meanings circulate, they have and do not have place, and we try to control them. In response to the comments from the boards of our forums we react: “but that is not what I meant.” As if we could control the interpretation, forgetting that what we say is always attached to other’s wordings. While in the act of

interpretation, this memory of this speech also brings its effects, allowing determined constructions of meaning, and nothing else in its place. We play, then, with the fault, the openings for interpretations and in this the risk of authorship resides.

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